

# **A barnacle on the dinghy of life**

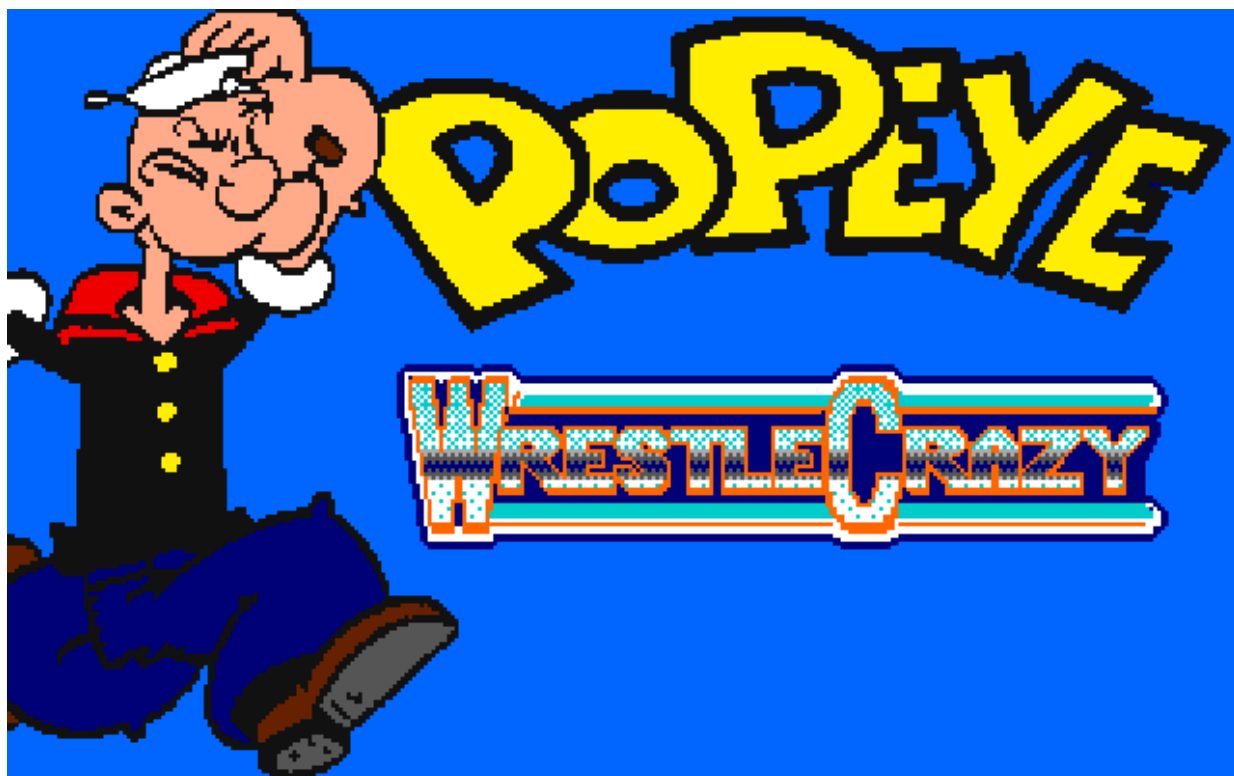
Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

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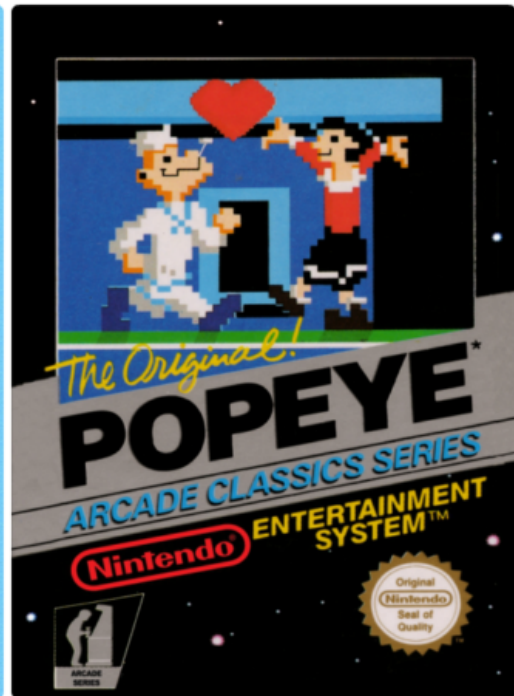
Commission a games design studio called Bizarre Developments to cobble together a licensed cartoon character tie-in title and it should surprise no-one when they devise something less than orthodox.

Popeye 3: WrestleCrazy is just one pertinent example in the Sheffield developer's quirky portfolio. One that includes a digitised interpretation of the mechanical funfair favourite, Kentucky Racing, Double Dare; a trivia game that attempts to recreate the TV quiz show hosted by Marc Summers, Huxley Pig, Bangers & Mash and Fireman Sam, all based on the eponymous kid's animated TV shows.



Shockingly enough Popeye 3 is a sequel to Popeye 2. You know, what with it featuring an integer one digit higher than the prequel. I believe that's how that works. The subtitleless second game in the series is also part of Bizarre's line-up, albeit a totally unrelated one. It's a traditional platformer in which you're tasked with collecting hamburgers and rescuing your first, your last, your everything, Olive Oyl, whilst kicking into touch your everlasting arch-nemesis, Bluto, later known as Brutus for misguided licensing reasons.

What in turn this is a sequel to I suppose is debatable as seven earlier Popeye games preceded it, none of which publisher, Alternative Software, or Bizarre Developments were involved with. Complicating matters further there exists another Popeye 2 title also released in 1991 by Activision for the Game Boy. More than likely though, Alternative's Popeye 2 is a loose follow-up to Don Priestley's 1985 humongously-sprited, heart-collecting platformer simply entitled Popeye, published by DK'Tronics.



Adding weight to the theory, Alternative Software went on to publish it solely for the Spectrum as part of 'The Popeye Collection'; a trio of games modelled on cartoonist Elzie Crisler Segar's machismo-impelled character inaugurally featured in his comic book strip 'Thimble Theatre' in 1929, before being re-branded 'Popeye' to reflect the shift in focus to its most popular character.

Segar died just nine years later at the tender age of 43 due to liver disease (or leukaemia depending on who you believe). Nevertheless, the public's appetite for his artistic offspring continued to gain momentum and Popeye remains a family favourite to this day. Every year after labour day his hometown, Chester, Illinois, plays host to 'The Popeye Picnic', a carnival and parade oriented towards celebrating the life and times of the notorious pre-superhero superhero.

Just the tip of the merchandising iceberg of course (lettuce joke pending), it should also be noted that you can still buy canned 'Allens Popeye Spinach' and bags of fresh 'Popeye

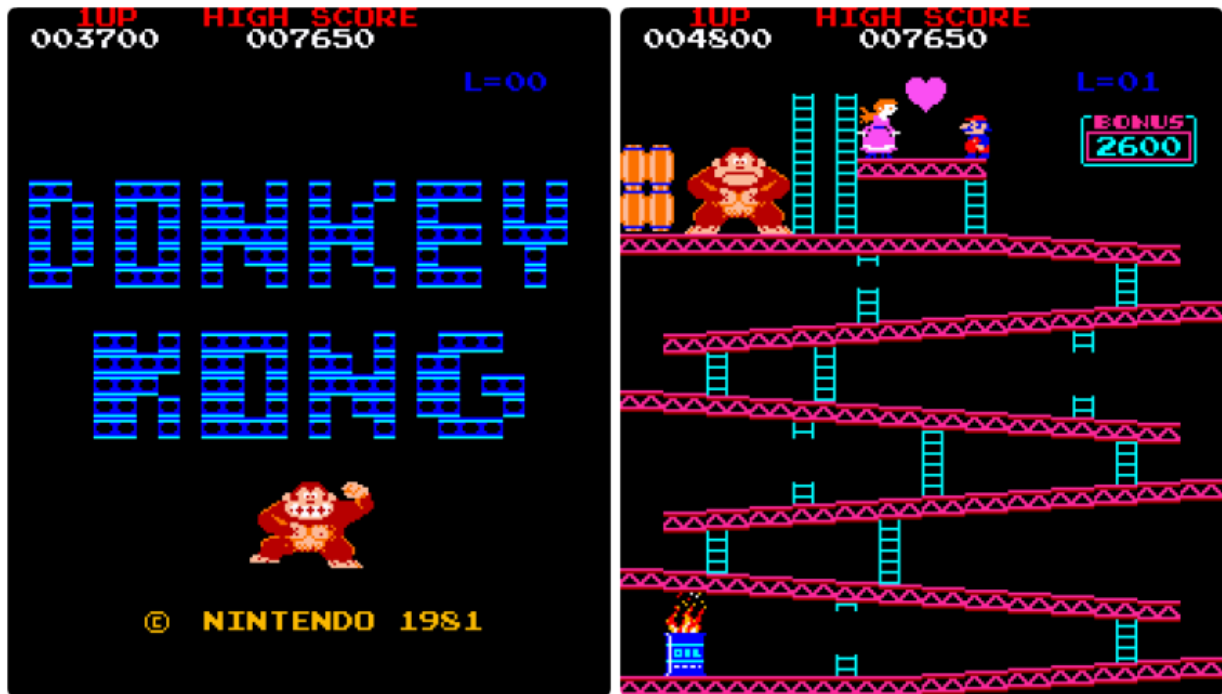
Superfood Spinach', two sailor-approved sources of the vitamin A and C, iron and calcium-packed vegetable. So grateful is the spinach industry for Popeye's positive influence on the consumption of the nutrient-dense leafy green that four statues have been erected in his honour.

Popeye based video game spin-offs too have a longstanding history across all platforms and genres. Donkey Kong released on 9th July 1981 designed by Mario's daddy, Shigeru Miyamoto, was set to be the first, only his plans had to be scrapped when he was unable to negotiate a deal with the publisher, King Features Syndicate. A carpenter named Jump-Man (who went on to become Mario), a gorilla and damsel in distress, Pauline, were substituted for the Olive-Bluto-Popeye love triangle, and the scaffold-bounding platformer was a runaway success, earning Nintendo \$280m by 1982, *without* the comic book license.

"In those days, Mr. Miyamoto's job was package design. I called him over one day and told him "Let's make a Popeye game for Game and Watch!", and so we began ironing out the concepts. But due to the aforementioned circumstances we instead decided to put it out on the remaining circuit boards as quickly as possible. Pretty early on we had decided that Popeye would go on the bottom of the screen and Bluto would be on the top, thus establishing the framework for the game, but we would later discover that we wouldn't be able to get the rights to use the characters after all. With no other options, we decided to keep the content of the game as it was and just change the characters. And so it was that those characters became Mario, Donkey Kong, and Princess Peach.

There was an episode in the cartoon show for Popeye in which Olive was sleepwalking and wandered around a

construction site. Whenever she was about to lose her footing, miraculously enough another platform would come out of nowhere and support her, and this left quite an impression on me. So we figured by using a construction site as the setting, there would be all kinds of things we could do, and thus chose that as the setting for our Popeye game."



"Once we had established that the game would be set at a construction site, Mr. Miyamoto suggested, "Let's make it a game where there are barrels falling from above, and the player has to dodge them." At that time, he had a simple gameplay idea which was that whenever a barrel fell the player could get on ladder and avoid it. Once the barrel had passed, the player would get off the ladder and then back on the platform to continue climbing.

But if we went with that idea it would obviously get frustrating after a while, and so I told him to make it so that the player could jump over the barrels when they

rolled towards him. This led to the idea of creating a 'jump' button. At first we had doubts as to whether the idea of jumping over barrels using a button would really work, but once we actually tried it we discovered that it was pretty effective, and decided to implement it.

As for where the idea for barrels came from, Mr. Miyamoto had suggested, "if we need an object that rolls, how about barrels?" This led to the discussion of why on earth there would be barrels at a construction site, and so it was suggested that we use oil drums instead. But we went with barrels anyways, I guess the reason probably being that their "rolling" animation was easier to draw.

Thinking about it now though, it seems that the imagery of the barrels we had used for the game left a strong impression. In the recently released "Donkey Kong Country", for example, the barrel itself is actually kind of a motif, and spawned the appearance of pirate ships and other such things in the game."

**Virtual Boy, Game & Watch and original Game Boy creator, the untimely late Gunpei Yokoi ('I Am Error' by Nathan Alice).**

"Even after the Popeye license fell through, I was still thinking about the relationship between Popeye, Bluto, and Olive Oyl. Their relationship is somewhat friendly. They're not enemies, they're friendly rivals. Donkey Kong was the first game project in which the design process began with a story. But I needed different characters. The main character, the big, strong guy, and the beautiful woman well, uh, Olive really isn't a beautiful woman. I figured I'd make mine beautiful instead (laughs). What's kind of a mystery is, why did I title the game Donkey Kong? The main character, the player, was Mario. That much was decided. But Donkey Kong, his personality was

the most fleshed-out of all of them. I think it's best to name the game after the strongest character."

**Shigeru Miyamoto ('Power-Up: How Japanese Video Games Gave the World an Extra Life' by Chris Kohler)**



Ironically, in spite of their initial knock-back, Nintendo also developed the first official Popeye games, a Game and Watch handheld title released on 5th August 1981 and an arcade game in 1982, which was subsequently ported to all the popular home computer formats of the era. As the story goes, King Features were so impressed with the critical reception of Donkey Kong that they acquiesced, granting Nintendo the license after all. Less than a month later Nintendo's LCD toy was on the shelves. Something doesn't add up.

But we're not here to discuss Nintendo *or* Donkey Kong... despite all the Nintendo and Donkey Kong discussion.

Pointless number appendaging aside, WrestleCrazy is a fairly typical WWF style one or two-player brawler (even spoofing the font used for its emblem), except that you play the titular one-eyed, muscle-bound sailor who is implausibly pitted against a succession of freaky aliens. These vary between the different versions of the game - Spectrum, Amstrad, Commodore 64 and Amiga - though your reason for wanting to smush their misshapen noses into the canvas remains the same. In two-player mode the second player takes the role of your first opponent, Torquos, and is unable to mirror your special moves. It's game over as soon as one of the players accomplishes a three-second pin.

An alien race known as the 'Kraggs' are plotting to colonise the universe, seizing control of the weakest planets first. To establish which inhabitants will be a pushover they stage the Seventh Intergalactic Olympiad, a series of enslaved wrestling bouts set in outer space.

As earth's representative, Popeye must face a motley crew of extra-terrestrials and defeat them to save the world from invasion. Pin your opponent (using the fire button when they're on the canvas) for three seconds in four out of five of the skirmishes and the planet is safe, while you'll need to triumph in all five to bring peace to the entire universe. Logically your opponent's ability to wriggle free from a pin depends on their current energy level so it makes sense to tire them out before closing in for the cover.



Should you be pinned yourself for three seconds it's instantly game over. There are no second chances - as Celine Dion says, "this is getting seeeeeerious". I don't think she was specifically referring to Popeye's WrestleCrazy, but the sentiment is the same. I must remember to ask her about that.

Primary attack manoeuvres available to you include a basic punch (in the Miggy version) or a kick (more of an ankle jerk really, and one that only applies in the 8-bit game), as well as a hoist-your-opponent-overhead-and-chuck-'em option. It's also possible to scale the corner post to stage a flying attack. Really though, success or failure is determined by your wagging prowess... as in all the *best* wrestling games. Hoho.

To attempt a grapple you must sidle up to your opponent and waggle furiously as if your life depended on it, appropriately. Once fixed in a hold more joystick abuse is required to fill your power metre - the first player to reach the top pulls off a vitality-draining headlock. Alternatively, you can unleash a brain-mashing pile-driver by hitting the fire button.



Munching on spinach and hamburgers tossed into the ring by Wimpey and your fickle girlfriend, Olive Oyl, will help you to build your strength faster, edging you closer to executing your killer signature move, though only if your opponents don't snag them first. Quite a novelty having to share your power-ups with the baddies, no?



Whenever you scoop up a can of spinach the momentous occasion is acknowledged by the appearance of an icon near your avatar. Consequently, your attacks temporarily become more powerful and the next time you win a grapple you'll automatically launch into turbo typhoon mode, which entails scrapping like cat and mouse in a dust cloud, thereby inflicting lots of bone-crunching pain in a short space of time. So I'm told by a now disabled three-eyed hob-goblin-y critter who asked to remain anonymous while the court case compo claim is still pending.

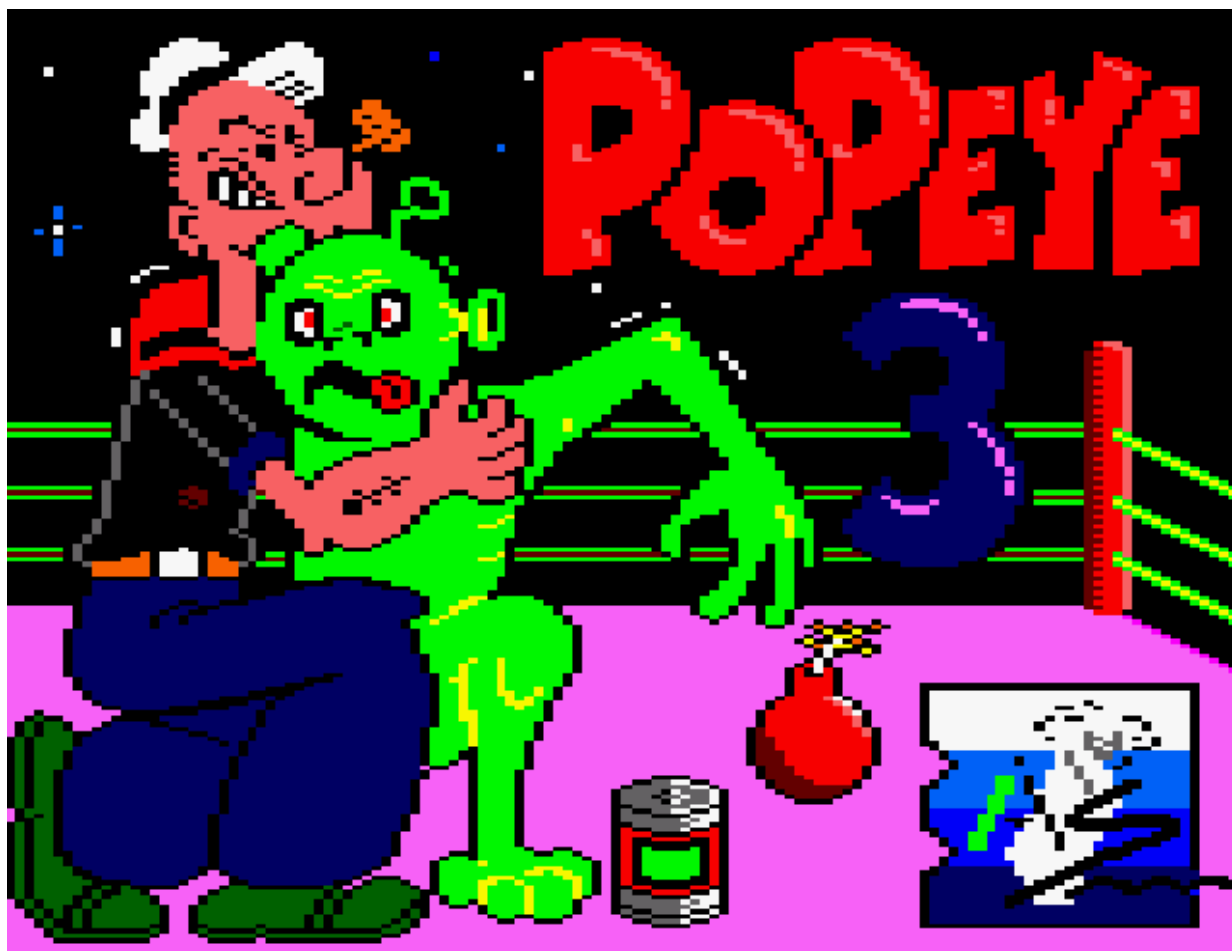
Embodying the pipe-tooting ironman we can assume "I'm strong to the finich 'cos I eats me spinach!" yet Popeye originally gained his superior muscle power by stroking the head of Bernice the Whiffle Hen. Don't look at me like that, it's true. Nonetheless, as that idea was dropped way back in 1932 sadly it won't help you here, even if there *was* one to be found fluttering about in the outer rim of the galaxy riding on an asteroid. Always going to be a long shot that one.

Not so conducive to your well-being is Popeye's pesky love rival villain, Bluto, who hurls cartoon style fuse-lit bombs into the ring. These sabotage your health as you'd expect, though can also be exploited for your benefit by manoeuvring assailants into their deadly path.



Popeye's theme tune is recreated faithfully in all the 8-bit versions, while the Amiga port takes the simple composition and jazzes it up inventively without losing the core recognisability or hum-alongable-ness. Which is a genuine Scrabble-conquering word on Planet Cobblers. I triple-checked with the High Council of Elder Statesdroids to ensure 100% correctitude.

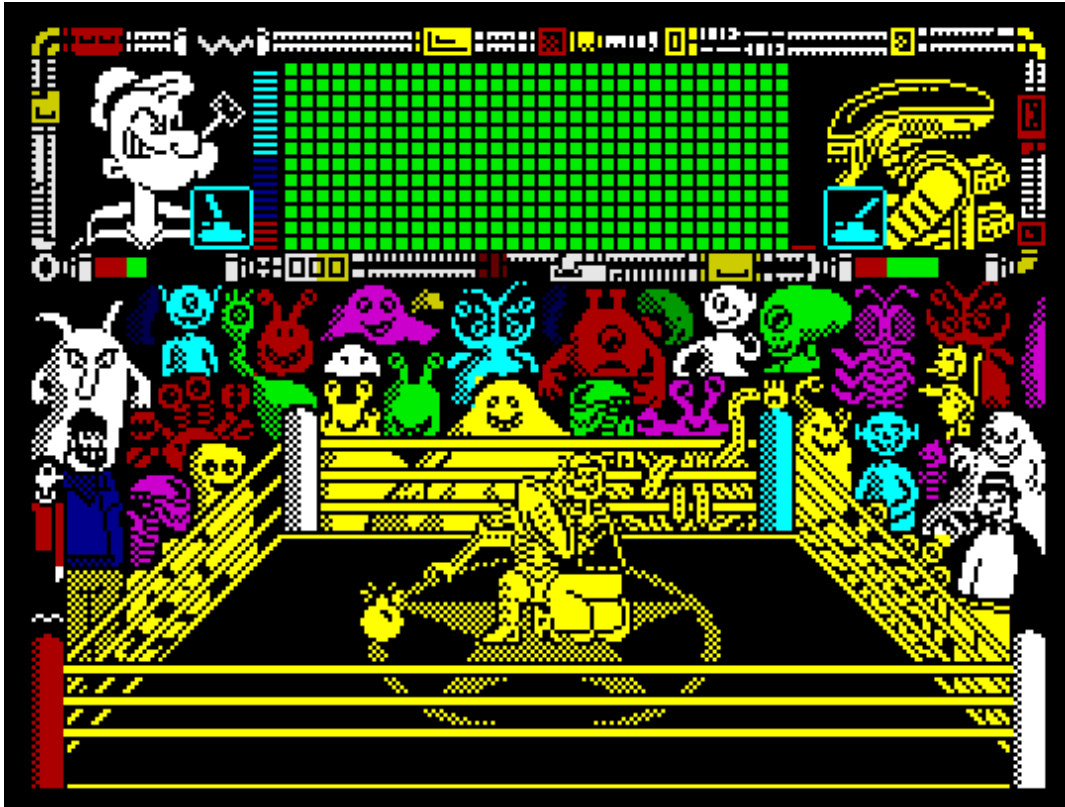
All versions favour spartan in-game sound effects over music, title screens aside. These are passable on the less capable systems, yet pathetically feeble on the mighty Amiga.



Each bout - optionally played at normal or slow speed - takes place in a different location depending on the opponent faced, and that in turns determines the gravitational influence. This being a spectator sport a throng of onlookers harangue you with heckles, I imagine to distract you into losing to save their own slimy race from invasion and inevitable slavery.

In the Amiga version these comprise the aliens you tackle throughout the game as well as as an intergalactic zoo of novel ones. Impressively for the 8-bit incarnations, the audience are all convincingly animated in the facial expression department, outclassing their shoddy 16-bit counterpart in which the crowd barely twitch an eyelid. It would seem that they'd rather be painting their nails and

watching them dry. Comically gracing us with its blobtastic presence in the Speccy version is a Jabba the Hutt lookalike who takes centre stage in the audience without being overly concerned with the action. No doubt he's preoccupied with dreaming about chomping down some tasty Klatooine paddy frogs, and has failed to notice that the apocalypse has landed on his doorstep.



Analogously C64 and Speccy gamers get to joust with Torqos, a Xenomorph clone from the Alien franchise (said to hail from the volcanic planet of Czykel in the Speccy edition and Trama in the C64 version), Robot B-9 as seen in the Lost in Space movie all the way from "a distant corner of the galaxy" and known as Andrek 5 in the Speccy version and just Andrek in the C64 game, and Flug Durch from the Zarkab Valley. The latter being a reference to a location found in the 8-bit game Trap by Alligata Software, a company Dave Palmer worked for before departing to set up Alternative Software with Roger

Hulley in 1987. Richard Stevenson coded the Spectrum and Amstrad versions of Popeye 2 and 3 as well as the Spectrum version of Trap so he'd know all about the 'flight through' (or Flug Durch in German) Zarkab Valley.

Over on the Amiga the baddies are largely more generic, the highlights being Vantarg the dragon from the planet Syzygy, and the teleporting Plasmatic Shadow Man from Pirexiss, who would be invisible save for his contour-hugging outline. Both characters also make appearances in the Speccy and C64 versions I should add.

The remainder include...

Gungoid from the planet Slyme, and the Battering-ram-shaped Sprogo from Zapta



Human-hedgehog hybrid, Spike, from Sharpt



Short Circuit-esque, Tractoid, from Combyne



Serpent-like, Repti, from Bog



Weighing in at 158 pounds, the two-legged spinach machine from earth, the one and only, Popeye. Oh wait, that's us.

Crew-cut caveman, Sethin, from Wullpak (is that an Emmerdale joke?)



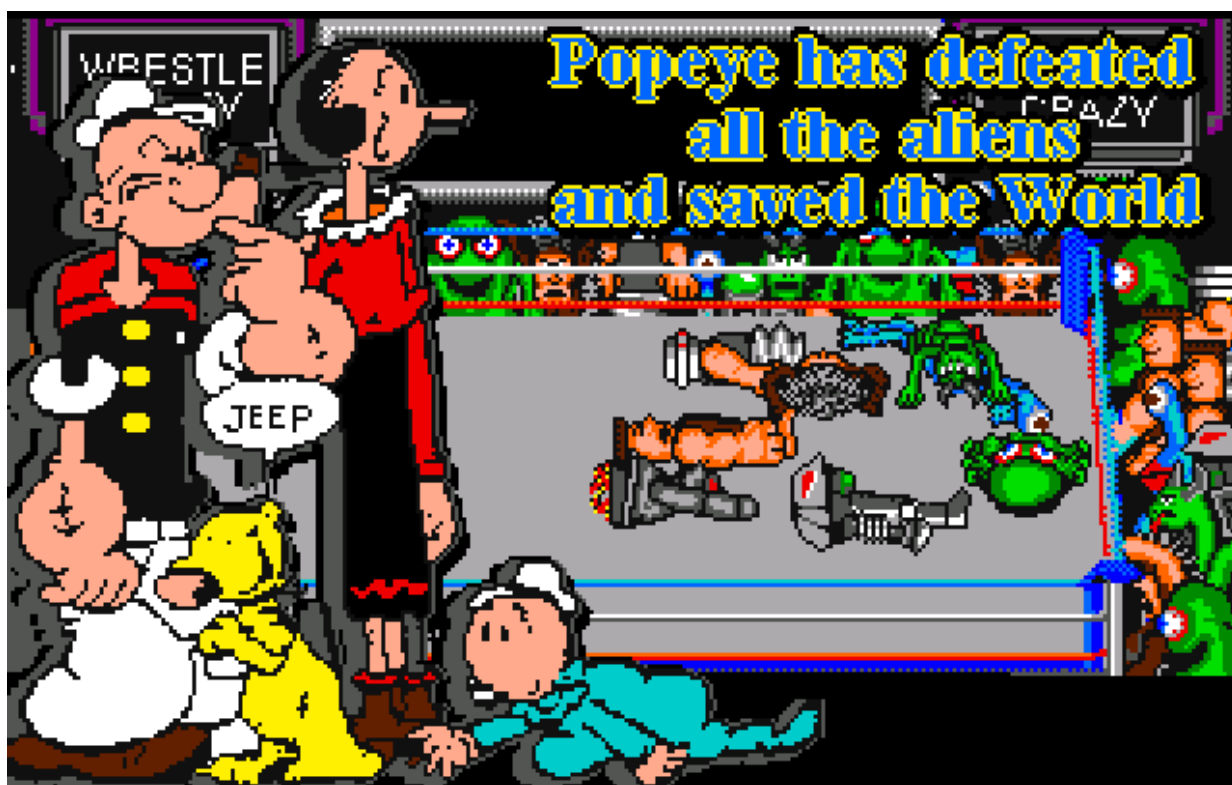
Cyborg, Plugg, from Electro9 (also a Street Sounds hip-hop album released in 1985)



Jet-propelled hover-bot, Foggit, from Intra, and finally, the stunted cyclops, Cyril, from Cyclo.

None of which makes an iota of difference to the way the different species fight because they're all fairly interchangeable, lacking any true nuance to their personality or style. As such Popeye needn't concern himself with wrapping his tongue around that funny 'strategy' word since adapting your approach to account for changes in the environment would be a pointless exercise in self-kidology to justify that whopping £3.99 investment.

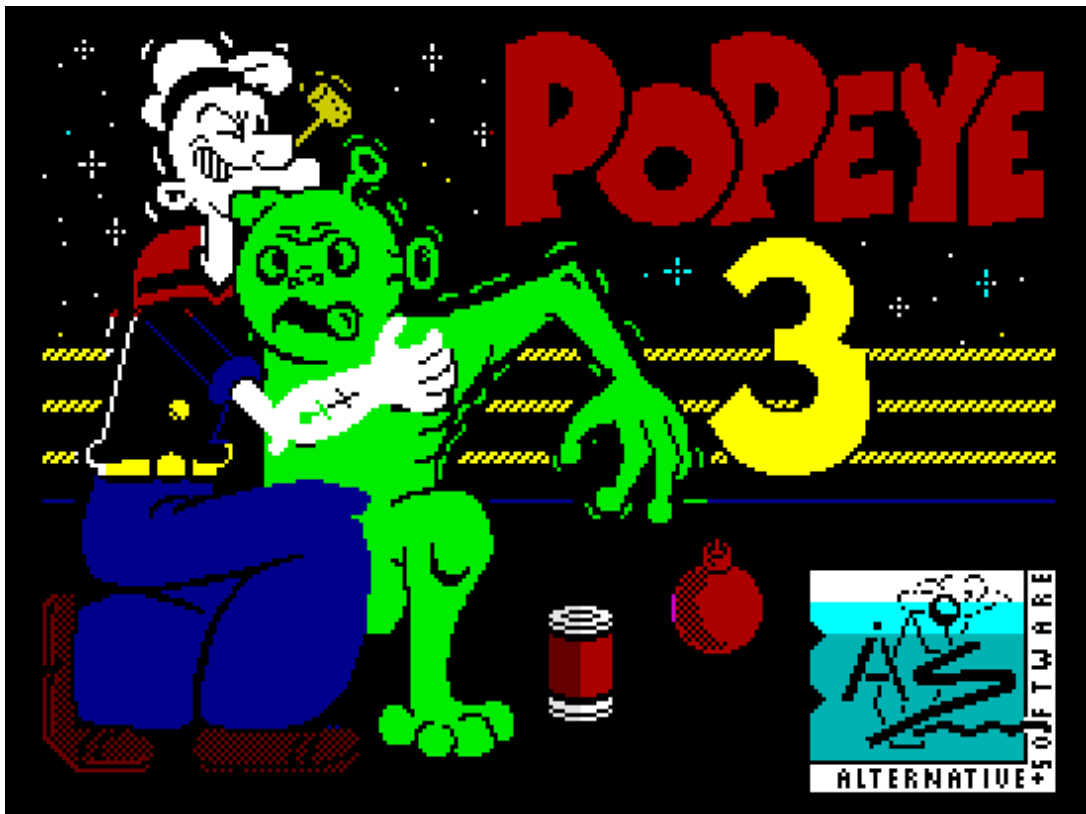
If you can beat the entire roster of heels into submission without being pinned yourself you're rewarded with the text message, "Popeye has defeated all the aliens and saved the world", and a static finale screen, albeit a very nicely drawn one... in the C64 version anyway. King Features would have insisted on that - they're sticklers for only associating themselves with true representations of their intellectual property, as Don Priestley would confirm given the stipulations he was expected to adhere to.



Forgetting for a moment that the hideous - potentially fan-made - Amiga conversion exists, all things considered, Popeye 3 is a quirky, amusing diversion that delivers just enough content to warrant its bargain-basement price tag, especially for Popeye fans.

Several 8-bit critics reviewed WrestleCrazy at the time of release (late 1992), arriving at polar opposite final scores. Amiga reviews, however, are rarer than rocking dodos ...with

hen's teeth, suggesting that this unofficial entry in the series wasn't even on their PD radar.



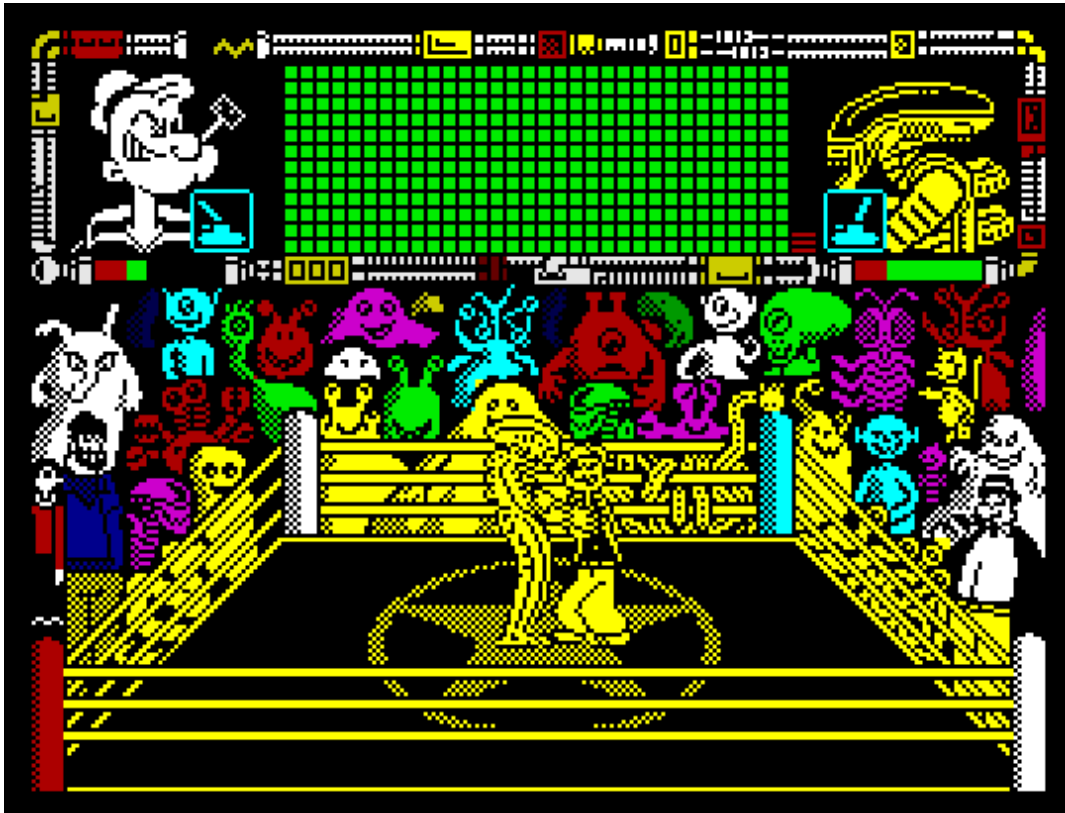
"Popeye 3 is an out and out wrestling game and in a way the Popeye character is only coincidental to the main plot. However, the spinach flinging antics, some nasty aliens and an excellent Popeye sprite make Popeye 3 worth a look. It's not WWF but it was never intended to be."

"Popeye finally has a license that has had some thought put into it. Colourful, quick and with real cartoon-style graphics, the only problem is a horrendously long loading system."

"Super colourful cartoon graphics with an excellent license gives Popeye 3 a solid lead over its two predecessors. It's a pure wrestling game, and a difficult

one at that. Remember as well, if you have the October issue of SU you should be able to load in an extra level with Big Al' on it. God help us!"

**84% - Sinclair User (November 1992)**



"Popeye isn't earth-shattering, but it's great fun and really gets you involved. You'll knacker your hands waggling for all you're worth. It's a lively, humorous game too. If you don't laugh at Popeye beating up Alien, you're too miserable. Lighten up."

**74% - Commodore Format (November 1992)**



"What a pity the programmers didn't eat their spinach. I'd rather be thrown overboard in the Arctic Ocean than play this game a moment longer. It's trying desperately to be the next WWF, and failing miserably. Popeye's kick is a waste of time, so the only thing left to do is get into a clinch and waggle the joystick like mad. Not only is this tiring on the arm (you end up with a bicep like an anvil), it's even more numbing for the brain. A good combat game requires at least some variety of moves to make it interesting. Lacking this essential ingredient, even Popeye 3's two-player mode can't provide any fun."

"With all the re-releases on the market at the moment, I rather hoped Alternative could come up with something more original. Sadly, Popeye 3 falls to the canvas in the first round."

**24% - Commodore Force (January 1993)**



Since the Popeye IP has already passed into the public domain everywhere in the world except America you'd expect post-2009 there to have been a raft of new Popeye games produced. Strangely not - the last entry in the franchise is Namco Hometek's side-scrolling race-platformer 'Popeye: Rush for Spinach' published in 2005 for the Game Boy Advance.

Maybe when the 1st of January 2025 rolls around and the US too are free to jump on the bandwagon someone will finally create a game that allows us to deploy Popeye's secret weapon to its full extent. I know I'll certainly be marking the date in my diary and powering up my Xbox 17 to scour the Chester, Illinois landscape for jet engine, blow torch, periscope and propeller pipe power-ups.